

Crafty intentions

Eager to put their artistic talents to good use, members of Berlin's celebrated creative set have been lining up to offer refugees workshops in everything from drawing to high-end furniture making – and often getting more than they bargained for. *By Alexander Rennie*

This October, Andrea Monroy, a Puerto Rican psychoanalyst, and Mariajosé Gavilán, an artist and therapist from Costa Rica, decided to set up a small art therapy group for migrant children.

"I've been an immigrant all my life," says Monroy. "My parents moved to Puerto Rico from Colombia when I was two years old following an earthquake and the ongoing civil war. When the crisis started, I felt overwhelmed by what I was seeing and worried that people would just say 'welcome' and that would be it."

After launching a Kickstarter page, the pair met their funding target of €400 in just two weeks. "It was amazing, but it caused us a little bit of anxiety," says Gavilán. "All of a sudden you have this money, and you don't know what to do with it..."

They arranged a group of volunteers and a schedule for their workshops at an emergency shelter in Wilmersdorf's disused city hall, but before they could even start, they hit a stumbling block. "We've just been put on hold because the children we were due to be working with are going to start receiving school classes," says Gavilán. "We understand this, but it's very frustrating, I wish we could just meet this first group of kids and get to it."

Gavilán bemoans the lack of clarity they've encountered from German government agencies. "It's not clear how everything works," she laments. "Maybe at first it was easy to go to a shelter and say 'Hey, I'm here, can I help?' but now as time goes by, it's becoming more difficult and they're asking for a more concrete commitment." On top of institutional obstacles, the two have found it difficult to branch out to other initiatives involved in the refugee crisis. "We've realised we were very idealistic at the beginning," says Monroy. "We discovered that we're alone on an island with this project. If we want to continue with this concept, we need to build bridges with more people involved in this situation."

This dilemma is something that Henriette Huppmann, project coordinator of Young Arts Neukölln, knows all about. Established in March 2012, her organisation runs two art-focused workshops every weekday for school-children in the local area. Since October, the Neukölln-based initiative has been hosting sessions with young refugees from Columbia-damm's Jahn Sporthalle.



Andrea Monroy and Mariajosé Gavilán (centre) with their volunteer art therapy team.

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"The refugee crisis is really en vogue at the moment," says Huppmann. "A lot of artists and organisations, big and small, have tried to reach out to refugee homes. But these shelters already have so much to do for the children, and so many people working with them, that they end up questioning whether they need further cooperation."

Implementing a small project might be an uphill struggle, but it's not all in vain. "The structures at these refugee shelters are pretty disorganised," Huppmann says, "but if a small project has a good concept and the individuals behind it know the right people to get in contact with, they have the same chance as a bigger initiative."

From project to 'profit'

In fact, sometimes these small initiatives become runaway successes – leading to new and unex-

pected challenges. Take Cucula, an independent furniture design project launched in 2013, back when Berlin's refugee movement was centred in the tented encampment on Kreuzberg's Oranienplatz. In contrast with today's wave of Syrians, most of these "O-Platz" refugees were Africans, fighting to stay legally in Germany (see page 5). "I passed by the camp at Oranienplatz every day on my bike, and it made me angry. I thought that it's not right and things had to be different," says co-founder Corinna Sy.

Cucula was born when a group of five West African refugees started attending an Enzo Mari-inspired furniture workshop initiated by one of Sy's colleagues, Sebastian Däschle. "The guys started building furniture with Sebastian, and the experience was just great for them," says Sy. "Otherwise, they'd have been just sitting there protesting and not being allowed to do anything."

The original idea was for the workshop participants to build furniture for their own personal use at the Oranienplatz camp. "But the guys said to us, 'We don't need the furniture because we're refugees; we don't know where we'll end up tomorrow.' Then, people came and saw the furniture and asked whether they could buy the pieces, and the idea slowly grew to start selling them."

This plan came with a hitch, though. Having come to Europe through Lampedusa, Cucula's furniture makers hold temporary papers delivered by Italian authorities; while 'tolerated'

in Germany, they are not legally allowed to work or earn money here. Undeterred, following a successful exhibition at the Milan Furniture Fair and an effective crowdfunding campaign, Sy helped establish Cucula as a non-profit *Verein*. "We decided to find a way for the guys to sustain themselves, without paying them – something we couldn't do," says Sy. "Part of our business model was to raise enough money equivalent to one year's worth of salary for each of the guys." And they did. Following 60 days of campaigning on Startnext, they secured a staggering €123,000, which they used to compensate the refugees with accommodation, education and access to health care.

Subsequent revenue from furniture sales has been spent on supporting the five participants, all of whom have been with Cucula from the very start. Sy's objectives are pertinently clear: "We're fighting on a political level for their right to stay here and using market forces to do something socially positive." She attributes the project's success partly to Mari's trendy, minimalist Italian designs, taken from his 1974 book *Autoprogettazione*. "This enables us to sell the furniture at a higher price," she says. "The guys aren't just doing random pieces or ethnographic prints. It's very important for us to have quality; this is the crux of Cucula."

Despite Cucula's success, Sy and co. are still fighting to keep the project's participants in the country. "We thought that our success would help us argue in front of the government that we are able to afford their upkeep and that they should be entitled to a residency permit," says Sy. Originating from Mali, Niger and Guinea-Bissau,

Cucula's refugee designers remain in asylum limbo – every few months, they must return to Italy to renew their papers. The situation is unlikely to change with the massive wave of migrants who've arrived this year. "We're all super proud of what we've achieved so far," Sy says. "But we haven't accomplished our main goal, which is that our participants can stay here, earn and be fully self-sufficient, and that's frustrating."

The novices

In some instances, the best way to help out is by being less ambitious and taking on a humble task. One particular twosome who did exactly that are Martin Ringenbach and Sevin Özdemir. After meeting each other whilst working in a call centre they were compelled to set up Pass the Crayon, a drawing group for refugee kids they started entirely from scratch.

"I couldn't go to bed knowing that those people were arriving here," says Ringenbach, "I'm French, and 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' is written everywhere at home – they're beautiful values, but somehow we tend to forget about them. I felt like I needed to do something, even just a little thing."

His revelation was a wake-up call for Özdemir. "I wasn't really paying attention to the situation to be honest," she says. "When Martin proposed the idea of just being with the kids, it made sense. It was time to stop talking about doing things and take action."

With no previous volunteer experience, the two started out hosting occasional sessions with children at Prenzlauer Berg's Sporthalle Wichertstraße shelter in tandem with Art Nuts, a small arts and crafts group for kids. They now run weekly Pass the Crayon workshops at a Berliner Stadtmission-operated shelter in a former cigarette factory in Spandau. Before confirmation from that shelter, their project was deferred by the same Wilmersdorf refuge Monroy and Gavilán are still wrangling with.

Chatting in a kitsch Schillerkiez cafe, Ringenbach is remarkably understanding when discussing the wait they had to endure to get their workshops in full swing. "It's normal when the first necessity is to deal with problems of basic organisation," says the Frenchman. "You can't be mad because you want to draw with the children and your project isn't prioritised."

In truth, after their first workshop, the two had to drastically reconsider certain aspects of their plan. "It's really complicated and we've had to adapt," says Ringenbach. "Originally we wanted to make age groups, but that's not the reality we're facing. We had children of all ages coming along, even babies who couldn't even talk!"

Sticking to the project's creative element is tricky at times too. "Sometimes the kids go crazy

because they're bored of drawing," Ringenbach jokes. "On one occasion two little boys said, 'Let's play basketball,' and we ended up doing that instead." Regarding their lack of experience, he says, "We're full of good intentions, but we accept the fact that we still have a lot to learn. We're not scared of looking like amateurs, because that's what we are!"

Revealing pictures

Helping out refugees can sometimes result from sheer chance, as it did in the case of American comic artist Ali Fitzgerald. At this year's 48 Hours Neukölln, Fitzgerald was approached by the director of Berliner Stadtmission's Moabit shelter: "He asked me whether I could do a comic workshop with refugees, and I thought it sounded great."

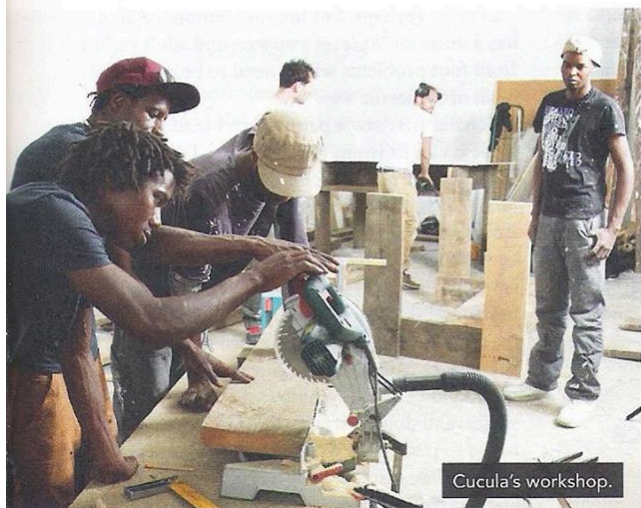
Since then, Fitzgerald has been holding a class every week with refugees of all ages, most of whom are Syrian. "It was hard for me in the beginning," she admits. "The things that they'd tell me and draw were so heavy. Some of them drew dead children or their spouses who'd been killed. There were a lot of dismembered bodies, destroyed homes and tanks too. I had a couple of moments when I thought about whether or not I could do this. After every workshop for the first month or two I would cry as soon as I'd left the shelter. I felt like I needed a drink." On the other hand, she says, "It's also incredibly rewarding. The refugees have been so kind and conscientious in the face of all their horrors. To see these people who've come through such tragedies maintaining humanity is a great thing."

Entering into her seventh month at the shelter, Fitzgerald has been invited to display some of the pieces from her workshops at the Neue Schule für Fotografie on December 4. Understandably excited about the Amnesty International-sponsored exhibition, she's still concerned about the comics' authorship: "It's something I think about a lot, putting on a show where the refugees don't even know about it."

Exhibiting these comics in a gallery space obviously raises some red flags about the risk of trivialising the refugees' tribulations. "It's certainly entered my mind – although a comic isn't inherently a joke," Fitzgerald says. "I'm going to try and make prints of their actual drawings and change the colour a bit to take it one step away from having a direct link. I will also tell my directors and see if they can invite the people involved. It's difficult because most of them have moved on – they might even be in different parts of Germany."

Aside from Fitzgerald's earnest apprehension, like Sy, Ringenbach and Özdemir, she says she's been enriched by her experiences. "It's nice to feel invested in something that's larger than yourself, especially in a place like the Berlin creative scene where it's so easy to become an ego monster," she says. "I don't think I'm a selfish person, but to be pulled out of that world and be exposed to people working through poverty in an honourable way has been the life-changing part for me." ■

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Cucula's workshop.

VERENA BRÜNING